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SCIENCE

A WEEKLY JOURNAL DEVOTED TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE, PUBLISHING THE
OFFICIAL NOTICES AND PROCEEDINGS OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION
FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE.

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FRIDAY, AUGUST 22, 1902.

THE NATIONAL OBSERVATORY QUESTION
IN ITS LATEST PHASE.

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THE newspapers have announced, we suppose on good authority, that Captain Colby M. Chester, U. S. N., has been selected as Superintendent of the Naval Observatory. It seems from these dispatches that the position is recognized as the most attractive and desirable in the gift of the Navy Department, and is tendered to an officer whose professional abilities and personal character are of so high a class as to render him eminently worthy of the reward. On the old theory that offices are rewards of merit, the action of the Department will doubtless meet general approval. And yet, the abnormality of the situation is such that we hope not to weary our readers if we summarize its principal features.

1. The institution in question is, notwithstanding its name, the national observatory of the United States. It has no rational purpose of existence except a desire on the part of the American people that our nation shall, in its public capacity, do its full share in the promotion of those branches of astronomy which have to be pursued under public auspices. The lead-

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ing position which our country has taken in the extraordinary development of astronomical science during our generation can alone justify the unparalleled expenditure of our government upon its observatory.

2. The results of this expenditure through the ten years since the completion of the new observatory should have been its general recognition as the leading observatory of the world in at least some important field of the sciences. With its great advantages over old-fashioned Greenwich and Paris, it should have left both these institutions in the rear.

3. Has it done anything of this kind? Is any work of prime importance in astronomical science being pursued? Do the astronomers of our own or any other country set that high price upon its output which it should command in the world of science? The claim has been made over and over by authorities too high to be ignored that these questions must be answered in the negative. The only official rejoinder to them which we can find is a very free use by the head of the observatory of such terms as 'malice,' 'animosities' and 'prejudices' in his recent annual reports. Did the criticisms in question allege overt wrong-doing, this sort of defence might be more or less in place. But a better defence to the charge that the observatory has been doing nothing of importance would be the showing of something important that it has done.

4. The conduct of the institution can add nothing to the efficiency of the naval service, and must subtract from rather than add to its high character in the eyes of the

world. The very appellation 'naval' is a misnomer.

5. The idea that even the best officer in the navy, which the new appointee may well be, can take up the present ill-organized institution, with its imperfect and often antiquated instruments, and its absence of definite aim, and lead the astronomical force on to that position which the establishment should assume in the world of science, is one that cannot be entertained by any impartial reviewer of the situation.

Under these circumstances, should the body of astronomers who desire to make their national institution a worthy representative of their science relax their efforts to bring this result about? Were there any doubt as to the reasonableness and justice of their cause—could even the show of a case against their view be made—they might well abandon their efforts in despair. But when the system against which they contend is so injurious to the good name of American science, and at the same time completely indefensible as it seems to us to be, patriotism and a due regard for the dignity of their science will not allow us to doubt that ultimately success must attend their efforts.

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE. SECTION C, CHEMISTRY.

THE meetings of Section C of the American Association for the Advancement of Science were held in common with those of the American Chemical Society from June 30 to July 3. The meeting place was the chapel of the Bellefield Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh. During the first two days the meetings were in charge of the